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Commentary on Tiner

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In Response to: Elza Tiner's *Teaching Freshmen to Reason - and Live - through Modes of Persuasion*

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Professor Tiner has shown us a picture of rhetoric being put to work. She puts it to work in getting her students to produce persuasive texts. Her major tool for doing this is Aristotle's rhetoric adapted to the audience and the times, freed from the cut and paste pedagogies that tend to make *Pathos*, *Ethos* and *Logos* separate items of study rather than elements or forces to be put in balance.

I want to underscore the obvious -- Professor Tiner is concerned with *composition* (the best translation of *dispositio* or *taxis* according to Barthes ("L'ancienne rhétorique," *Communications* 16: 213)) that is, with the production of persuasive texts -- so as to better express my admiration for her results. The website portfolios we have seen are first-rate examples of what can be done when rhetoric is not confined to matters of eloquence or style or just persuasion (where whatever works is said to fill the bill).

But I also want to underscore these obvious merits so as to better pick out a very small spot where there may be a bit of a problem. The problem is not central to Professor Tiner's presentation. So, in pointing to it, I will not be taking anything back or doing any damage to her presentation. But it is a problem.

I don't know how many of you blinked when Professor Tiner said "more advanced students are able to work deductively, from theory to examples, whereas most less advanced students need to proceed from examples to theory." But I did. And I did so because in saying this, I saw a tendency to make rhetoric look like it is theory driven when it is not or is not in the ways we ordinarily think about theories. Moreover, the problem comes up as soon as we ask about the relation between production and reception or interpretation, about the relation between writing and reading. It comes up here because if rhetoric in some specifiable ways governs the production of texts, does govern, too, their reception or interpretation? Is reading theory driven?

In any case this matter could stand more scrutiny. "Fact is richer than diction", as Austin said (1979. "A Plea for Excuses." In *Philosophical Papers*: 195). So to make at start in this scrutinizing business, I want to look at a case of reading. My case will be P. N. Furbank on J. G. A. Pocock's reading of Gibbon. Furbank chides Pocock on his failure to respond to ""writing" -- the feats of prose, and sedulous cultivation of a style and a rhetoric, of d'Alembert, Hume or Gibbon. Yet, above all in the case of Gibbon, this is where so often the meaning lies " (NYRB, November 30, 2000: 58).

This chiding makes sense, is warranted, only if it is believed that *understanding* d'Alembert, Hume or Gibbon involves recognising, if not responding to, their "feats of prose, and sedulous cultivation of a style and a rhetoric". Getting their meaning involves recognizing not just what they said but how they said it -- recognizing the figures they used so as to say it. This is to say that reading is constrained in some ways. All readers are expected to be able to recognize comparisons, contrasts, oppositions, exaggerations, taking back things already said, corrections etc. along with the work they do in a text (whether they know the names -- metaphors, antithesis, hyperbole, epanorthosis (Gibbon's favoured figure), syllepsis, and the rest is not really important,

the work done is). If this is right, then rhetoric plays two roles or does two jobs: production and interpretation.

So why does Pocock miss it, muff it? There are at least two lines of response. Professor Tiner says that these modes of persuasion, *pathos*, *ethos*, *logos*, are inherent in spoken and written discourse. Descartes and Pascal, for example, said pretty much the same thing although they had different reasons for saying it. Anyhow, they all make it look like rhetoric is "natural" like walking upright. So, if Pocock misses any feats of prose, it's because he's been a bit negligent, inattentive or whatever else might account for a crash in the programme.

The second line has it that maybe Pocock did not know any better. He never learned these things or perhaps he just forgot about them. Here the line is that, just as we have to learn to count, we have to learn to do the things we do with words, we have to learn how they work and the work they can be made to do and all their different ways of doing it. But how do we learn these things? This question takes up back to the matter of theory.

We often think of learning as something that happens in two ways, by going up or by going down. We more fully describe the ways by saying: we go from theory to examples or cases; alternatively by saying: We go from examples or cases to theory. The way we go depends on our particular cognitive style or level of cognitive development (fourth year students are better at theory than first year students).

This makes it look like theories and examples or cases are all related to one another in the same ways. That is, theories are said to be, or thought to be, made up of laws or principles from which particular instances are derived and explained or accounted for. We learn about Boyle's law by repeating his observations and experiments. Once we learn the law, we are not surprised (cognitively) when we notice that holding a match under a balloon results in a burst balloon. Once we learn the theory, we can predict all kinds of things about the behaviour of gasses. Once we learn the theory, we can derive all kinds of applications (internal combustion engines, and so on). Most importantly, once we learn the theory, there's no more to learn.

But that's not the case with rhetoric. Once we learn the theory, if there's any theory to learn, we still have to learn what it's good for and how to use it. We need something other than a theoretical knowledge of the figures to invent a metaphor or a syllepsis or whatever and to put them to work in the right places. We need something other than the knowledge that an argument will be rationally persuasive if and only if its warrants are rational so as to come up with those warrants.

More importantly, with Boyle's law, examples stand to the law as confirming instances, as proofs and as instances or illustrations (pedagogical). In rhetoric, examples may be illustrations, instances of sorts but they hardly ever are proofs. Moreover, in rhetoric, we look for or are given models or paradigms or best examples to follow and imitate, with the hope that once we get it right, we can go on and invent some new ones, make new moves, and the rest. That's why, even if Pocock knows all about rhetoric, even if he masters all the "theory", he can still miss Gibbon's "feats of prose" and some part of Gibbon's meaning.

I'm convinced that more learning takes place in the making of the website portfolios that in thumbing through Lanham's *Handbook of rhetorical terms* or Grambs, *Dictionary for Writers and Readers*, or even carefully reading Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. (But this is, I believe, Aristotle's lesson, not mine (M. Leff makes the same point; cf. "A Humanist Response to Gaonkar." In

1997. *Rhetorical Hermeneutics*. Albany, New York. State University of New York Press: 97-98.) Anyhow, that's why I am so full of admiration and praise for the work professor Tiner has made rhetoric do in her classes.